

# The Last Sandwich— A Beta-Minimum

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THE OPPOSITE OF A BETA-MAX is a beta-min: a route with scanty information about difficulty or direction or history. It may not be in a local guidebook because it is too new. Or perhaps the first-ascent party didn't bother to write it up, or is inaccessible, or dead. Perhaps it is an old route and in the guidebook, but the guidebook author heard only second-hand about the direction and rating. So it is entered with no topo or a vague topo.

I'm attracted to the beta-min because I feel that too much climbing is known and prescribed. My eyes glaze over when scanning the big matrix of shoes in climbing magazines, all rated in colorful columns and criteria. Route stars in guidebooks tell us which climbs are best. Rock stars tell us what exercise routine to follow, how to tape up, how to hang on a rope and still call it climbing. Nutrition fanatics tell us what to eat. Environmentalists even tell us how to excrete what you eat on big walls.

The trend toward increasing prescription in climbing insures that there are few beta-mins at any one time. One guidebook author might create a beta-min, only for the next one to clarify the mystery surrounding the route. Or someone like me writes about a beta-min, and it becomes a beta-max. Fortunately, climbers produce routes so quickly that some climbs are sure to be absent from current guidebooks. In such cases, the only source of information may be rumor or tall tales, thankfully subject to errors, varying interpretations and exaggerations central to good beta-mins.

*Cases:* Some beta-mins escape clarification for many years. The north face of Cloud's Rest is an old beta-min, an enticing mystery artfully described by Steve Roper in his *Guide to the High Sierra*. Roper tried unsuccessfully to get route information from Bob Kamps and Ivan Couch who did the first ascent. Roper writes, "Little is known about this route, except that it wanders up the 4000-foot, low-angle face. By careful route finding, it is possible to avoid using aid." Roper's few words stoke our curiosity. "Little is known," as if we might be embarking on a trip into the Bermuda Triangle. "Except it wanders," suggesting it goes many places, not just up some easily defined way. "4000-foot, low-angle face," implying low angle but a longer trip than anything on El Capitan! "It is possible to avoid aid," meaning only caution will enable us to avoid tainting our experience.

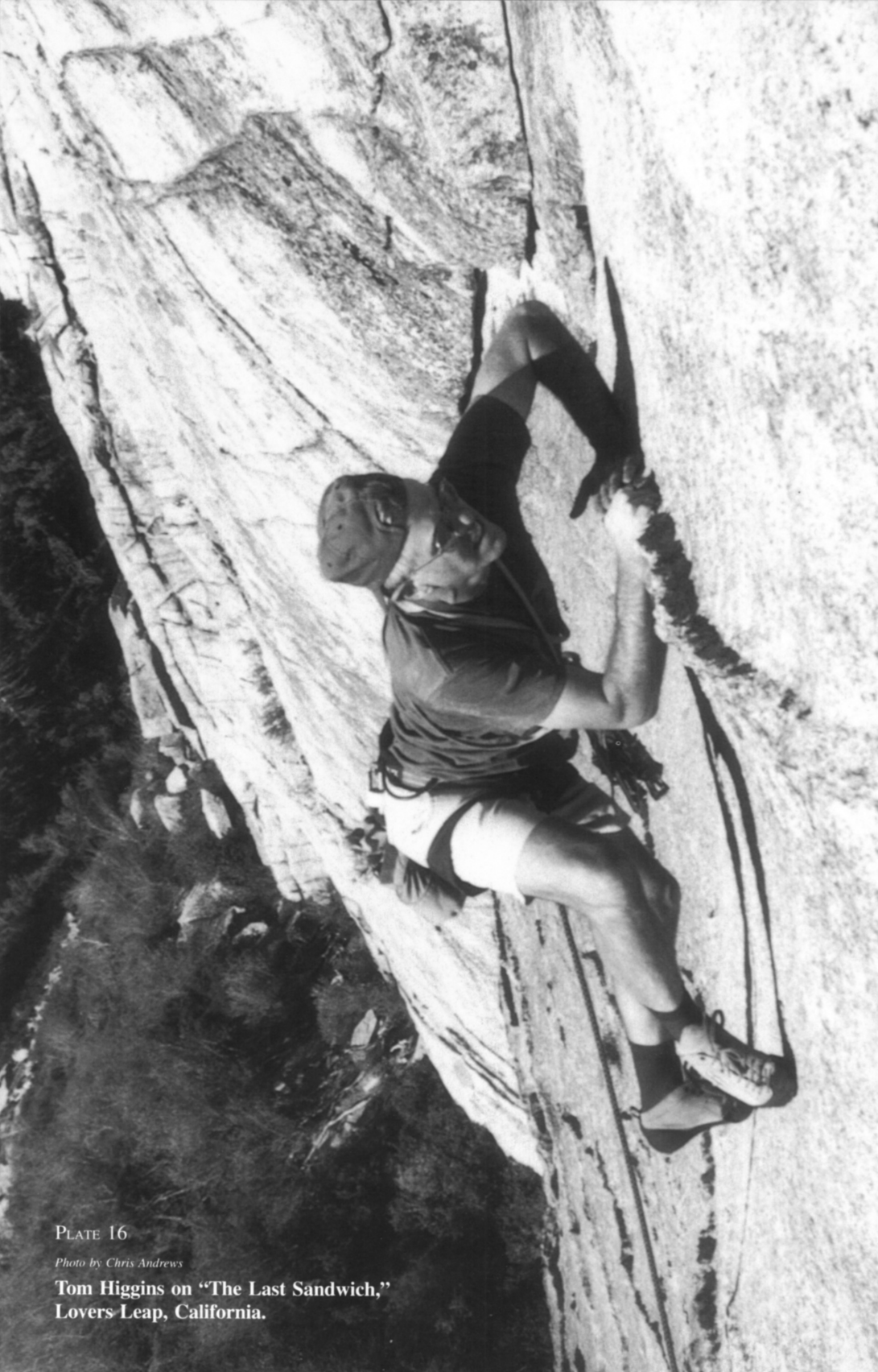


PLATE 16

*Photo by Chris Andrews*

**Tom Higgins on "The Last Sandwich,"  
Lovers Leap, California.**

In a few words we are tantalized, mildly warned about the undertaking and reminded that real climbing is without aid. Maybe Cloud's Rest deserves perpetual beta-min status. How wonderful it would be if some secret always surrounded the climbing of this sweeping granite giant, barely visible from nearby civilization, Yosemite Valley.

Fairview Dome in Tuolumne Meadows holds a classic beta-min. Long ago, Bob Kamps and I climbed Always Arches on the eastern face of the dome. It is a multi-pitch 5.10 with some neat climbing over lots of arches. We wrote it up and sent it to the guidebook authors. Strangely, it was listed in the index of the 1983 *Guidebook to the Tuolumne Meadows* but the reader turning to page 52 to view the usual topo finds nothing. Maybe the authors, Don Reid and Chris Falkenstein, couldn't understand the gibberish drawing I sent them. A later guidebook showed a short arrow pointing up the rock in the general direction of the route, providing connoisseurs of beta-mins a teaser to start them up the wall. Neither Bob nor I bothered to develop a detailed topo for the latest guidebook, and we have long forgotten exactly where the route goes. After all these years, Always Arches is a quintessential beta-min.

A variation of the beta-min is the beta-wrong. A climb at Lovers Leap near Tahoe provides an example. In the late 1960s, Ben Borson and I climbed a route on the eastern wall of Lovers Leap, which we named "The Deviate." We never wrote up the climb in detail, but we told the guidebook author where the route went and its difficulty. Sometime later, a party climbed the route, thought it a first ascent and named it "A Few Dollars More." The description they sent the guidebook author was probably more explicit than ours. Instead of recognizing both routes as the same, the author put the Deviate into his 1980 guidebook, *Tahoe Rock*, as a separate, strangely bending route in the middle of nowhere below and right of Dollars. The latest guidebook to Tahoe again credits Ben and me with the Deviate, a route living only on paper. I love to think of climbers dutifully holding a guidebook in hand, squinting up the cliff at our non-existent route, then launching into a beta-wrong experience.

*The Last Sandwich.* The latest *Tahoe Guide* has another beta-min which Allen Steck and I pondered one recent summer day. It is called "The Last Sandwich" and is just left of Scimitar at Lovers Leap. We can't believe our eyes while looking at the guidebook topo. A modern guidebook route with no rating? We carefully check the index of routes by name, the first-ascent party (Steve Miller, Will Cottrell, 1984), and all the usual cross tabulations in modern guidebooks. No rating! Our pleasure at discovering a beta-min is tempered a little as we realize neither of us knows the first-ascent party. We can't guess the route difficulty by speculating about the capabilities of the first-ascent team, one of the great pleasures of the beta-min.

The other "problem" is the topo, which is fairly specific. It shows two bolts on the route, a line of climbing going over a roof, up an arch, a shared belay with Fantasia at one point, with Scimitar at another. So, it's not a perfect beta-min, but we'll take it.

We start the hike to look over the climb. "So, Allen, what do you make of the name?" "Sounds ominous," he says. "Well, we'll just retreat if it looks bad," I say. In the beta-min, retreat is perfectly acceptable. But the route blows any hope of retreat by looking feasible and fearful. About fifty feet up a slab of big ripply dikes is a bolt, then a bulge, then a roof followed by an arch. Now we have to try it.

I wander up the slab, staying just left of Scimitar. At the forty-foot level, I realize I'm dead if I come off this moderate rock. My mouth gets dry. I try the usual remedies. I sling a big gray knob with no top. The sling falls off. I see another knob which looks better, but it is too far to the left to be on line. I have to stay on line like the first-ascent party. Or did they? I go back and forth across the dikes, looking for the easiest move to the next dike. The sun clicks down another notch to the west. Well, at least I had my sandwich. I do a series of mantles on the biggest, roughest parts of the dikes I can find, telling myself that I can reverse if things get hard. But when I'm close enough to the bolt, it seems better to go to it rather than to talk to myself any more about retreat. Click, and I'm there.

Above the bolt, my mind starts to spin again. It's twenty feet or more to an arch where the next protection goes. If I make a stupid mistake, the bolt is the only protection before the ground. I take the easiest possible way to the arch and put in a bunch of protection. Then I climb to the logical break in the arch and put in more protection, just in case the wall falls off. Now, the rope is crisscrossing all over the place. Climbers watching us will think we're into macrame. After the protection, the move over the roof is so easy I laugh at myself.

Much higher, a little left-facing arch looks easy but gets harder as it goes. The laughing stops as I place two small RPs and make a spider-like lieback move, eyeing the RPs all the way. Maybe the protection far below wasn't such a bad idea after all! Soon the pitch ends on a good square-cut ledge left of Scimitar. The topo shows Sandwich joining Scimitar at this point, but we take an ounce of pleasure in keeping the route separate from Scimitar.

As Allen follows, he just flows along. His gymnasium work-outs are paying off. His white hair comes out from under a broad hat strapped onto his head. "You must be fairly old now, Allen," I say. "Right, fairly old," he says, "and considering our combined ages, surely we've got the record for this gutty route." I'm hoping something on this pitch will slow him down, but only the little RP arch stops him for a time. "How was that?" I ask. Expecting the right answer, I add, "I thought it was *really* hard." He says, "Fairly hard." I realize I've met my bantering match and just shut up.

Once Allen arrives, he says he'd prefer I lead the next pitch, wherever it is. His pinned and wired ankles are not well today and caution him not to explore. I agree and head up to a small arch and bulge directly above the belay. Hidden there is a perfect slot for a little quad-cam. Above, the climbing is easy and fun to the second bolt. A mild run-out above the bolt connects to a belay ledge on Fantasia. Here, one could belay a few feet to the right of Fantasia, but close enough as to be a moot point.

From the belay, we look up and see two fixed pins pointing the way, the upper one sticking out of an arch and sporting a back-off sling. It's not clear



PLATE 17

*Photo by Chris Andrews*

**"The Last Sandwich" on Lovers  
Leap.**



if the route crosses the arch at the upper pin, continues up the arch or what. Both ways look bad. Gulp! Maybe this beta-min stuff is crazy. "I'll be right back if I can't get anything in above the crap pin," I say. "Good thinking," says Allen.

Getting to the upper pin is reasonably tricky. Above the pin, the arch seals up. I move up, stemming, liebacking, face climbing, hoping for protection, thinking I should have crossed the arch lower down. I'm also thinking I'll hit Allen if I go and the old pin pulls. Just as I'm ready to back down, a little square opening appears in the arch. On tip-toes off little edges, I park a quad-cam inside. I continue up and up the arch until holds appear over it. The final move out of the arch is a strange little stretch, but above, the rock eases back into a lower-angle slab area. A fixed pin up and right draws me up to it. Slightly above is a belay on a ledge only a few feet left of Scimitar.

As Allen follows, I again ask for an assessment. He thinks the moves under the arch are the crux of the entire route. Our roles are shaped by the route. I break the ground. He's the barometer, coolly evaluating what we've done.

I realize the sun is going. This is the second route of the day and we've been slow. We have a pitch to go. From here, the easiest way appears to be up and left, but into an area close to where Fantasia ends. We want to keep separate from Fantasia to the left and Scimitar to the right. I decide to try straight up. A low-angle slab above the little arch where we belay is not so low angle. I start up, step down, start up, step down. Maybe I'm off route? I stand out on a little point of exposed rock overlooking Scimitar and again check out the final slab. From here, I see holds higher up. I'm fifteen feet from Allen with no protection between us. I fiddle with the proven protection device of the day, a little quad-cam, and find a flaring placement under a small overlap. It's just good enough to suck me in. Three moves later, a ramble up the slab and over truck-sized blocks, and I'm on top.

*Sundown.* Allen comes up. We're happy. As a beta-min, the route played out well. We knew where it went, but not how it went. The route name fit: a stupid move on the first pitch would mean the last sandwich. Protection was uncertain, scanty, secretive. The back-off sling was an appropriate omen. The vanishing day gave us some urgency. The climbing was *difficult*, or *fairly* difficult, or *pretty* difficult. Maybe we did the first ascent of the direct finish pitch. We'll probably never know. All in all, Last Sandwich was a good beta-min.

We're quiet on the way down. I'm wondering how and why my thirty years of climbing have led me to this beta-min. I love moving on rock with the unknown. There's joy in being tricked and surprised, then tricking and surprising the rock right back, and talking and bantering about it all with a like-minded partner. Maybe there's no mystery in the satisfaction of a beta-min. It's part of the same quirky pleasure I've always felt for climbing.

Fiery high clouds cut across to the west. The ground and the trees are enveloped in a gathering haze. I let down as we go along. For several minutes, I'm thinking all this clawing around stone really doesn't mean a damn next to the spinning earth and star-shot sky. Then, the quirk is back:

"Say, Allen, what if we threw away our guidebooks?"